

The Quality of Mindfulness

Ajahn Brahmavamso

Note: This is Chapter Six of the book: *The Beautiful Breath: The Comprehensive, Step-By-Step Buddhist Meditation Instruction of Ajahn Brahmavamso*, which will be published in the future.

In this chapter, I want to explore "mindfulness" in greater depth. Mindfulness is one of the controlling faculties (indriya) which creates success in meditation. If it's not fully understood, and fully practised, one can waste a lot of time in one's meditation. I will now explain the quality of mindfulness.

Setting Up the "Gatekeeper" Inside

I like to use the simile for mindfulness of a person who's guarding a door or guarding a gate. The simile of the gatekeeper to describe mindfulness was used by the Buddha (AN VII, 63). For mindfulness is not just being aware, being awake, or being fully conscious of what's occurring around you. There is also that aspect of mindfulness that guides the awareness on to specific areas, remembers the instructions and initiates a response. For example, suppose you were a wealthy person with a gatekeeper guarding your mansion. One evening, before going to the Buddhist Temple to practise meditation, you tell the gatekeeper to be mindful of burglars. When you return home, your loving kindness suddenly vanishes when you find your house has been burgled. "Didn't I tell you to be mindful?", you scream at the gatekeeper. "But I was mindful", pleads the gatekeeper. "I gave attention to the burglars as they broke in, and I was clearly attentive as they walked out with your digital T.V. and state-of-the-art C.D. system. I mindfully watched them go in several times, and my mind did not wander as I observed them going out with all your antique furniture and priceless jewellery..."

Would you be happy with such a gatekeeper's explanation of mindfulness? A wise gatekeeper knows that mindfulness is more than bare attention. A wise gatekeeper has to remember the instructions and perform them with diligence. If he sees a thief trying to break in then he must stop the burglar, or else call in the police.

In the same way, a wise meditator must do more than just give bare attention to whatever comes in and goes out of the mind. The wise meditator must remember the instructions and act on them with diligence. For instance, the Buddha gave the instruction of the 6th Factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, "Right Effort." When wise meditators practising mindfulness observe an unwholesome state trying to "break in", they try to stop the defilement, and if the unwholesome state does slip in, they try to evict it. Unwholesome states such as sexual desire or anger are like burglars, sweet-talking con artists, who will rob you of your peace, wisdom and happiness. There are, then, these two aspects of mindfulness: the aspect of mindfulness of awareness and the aspect of mindfulness of remembering the instructions.

In the Buddhist Suttas, the same Pali word "Sati" is used for both awareness and memory. A person who has got good mindfulness is also a person who has got a good memory, because these two things go together. If we pay attention to what we are doing, if we are fully aware of what we are doing, this awareness creates an imprint in our mind. It becomes easy to remember. For example suppose you're in danger. Suppose you come very close to having a serious car accident. Because of this danger, your mindfulness would become extremely strong and sharp. And because of that sharpness of mindfulness in a potential accident, you would remember it very easily, very clearly. In fact, when you went back home to sleep that night you might not be able to forget it. It might keep coming back up again and again. This shows the connection between awareness and memory. The more you are paying attention to what you're doing, the better you remember it. Again, these two things go together: awareness and memory.

If we have gatekeepers who have developed awareness, they will pay attention to the instructions that they are given. If they pay full attention to the instructions that are given, they will be able to remember them and act on them diligently. This is how we should practice mindfulness. We should always give ourselves clear instructions with full attention so that we will remember what it is we are supposed to be doing. The teacher's job is also to give clear instructions to help us in guiding the mind. That is why I teach in very clear stages: stage 1, stage 2, stage 3, etc. When we make the

training in meditation methodical, when each stage is very clear, then it becomes possible to give our "gatekeepers" clear instructions.

Instructing the "Gatekeeper"

At the beginning of the meditation when you start stage 1, you should remind yourself that there's a gatekeeper inside -- that which can be aware of what's happening and can choose where to put that awareness. Tell that gatekeeper something like: "Now is the time to be aware of the present moment." "Now is the time to be aware of the present moment." "Now is the time to be aware of the present moment." Tell the gatekeeper three times. You know that if you have to repeat something, you're much more likely to remember it. Maybe when you were at school, if you couldn't spell a word, you'd have to write it out a hundred times. Then you'd never forget it after that. This is because when you repeat something, it takes more effort. It's harder to do. You have to force the mind a little bit more, and mindfulness has to become stronger. What's easy to do doesn't take much mindfulness. So make it a little bit difficult for yourself by repeating instructions such as: "I will be aware of the present moment." "I will be aware of the present moment." "I will be aware of the present moment". Again, say that to yourself three times.

Now with the gatekeeper, like any other servant or worker, you don't have to keep giving the same instruction every second or two. In this way of developing mindfulness just give that instruction to the gatekeeper three times at the beginning, then let the gatekeeper get on with the task. Trust the gatekeeper to know what it's doing.

Instruct your gatekeeper in the same manner as you would instruct a taxi driver. You just tell them clearly where you want to go, then you sit back, relax and enjoy the journey. You trust the driver knows what they are doing. But imagine what would happen if you kept telling the driver every few seconds "Go slower... Go faster... Turn left here... Now go into third gear... Look in your mirror, mate ... Keep to the left..." Before you completed a few hundred yards of your journey, the taxi driver would rebel, get angry and throw you out of the taxi. No wonder then, when meditators keep giving instructions to their gatekeeper every few seconds, their minds rebel and refuse to co-operate.

So just let the mind get on with the job of being in the present moment. Do not keep interfering with it. Give the mind clear instructions and then let go and watch. If you establish mindfulness in this way, with clear instructions, you will find that your mind is like everyone else's mind. That is, once it's given clear instructions, it'll tend to do what it's told. It will obviously make mistakes now and again. It will sometimes not go straight to the present moment immediately. Or sometimes it will go to the present moment and then wander off again. However, the instruction which you've given it will mean that as soon as it starts to wander off into the past or the future there is something which remembers. Mindfulness remembers the instructions, and mindfulness puts the attention back into the present moment. For you, the onlooker, it's something that is automatic. You don't need to choose to do it. It happens automatically, because mindfulness has been instructed in the same way that a gatekeeper, once instructed, does all the work. You don't have to give any more instructions. You can just watch the gatekeeper do the work. This is trusting the mind, knowing the mind, knowing its nature and working with its nature.

I encourage you to play around with the mind and know its capabilities. One of the first things that I was told on my first meditation retreat as a student was that there is no need to set the alarm for getting up in the morning. (Actually I think we were getting up at five o'clock in the morning at that retreat. It was a "soft retreat".) The Teacher said, just to determine the waking time, and to tell yourself before going to bed at night, "I'm going to get up at five to five." (That was just five minutes before someone was going to ring the bell.) "Don't set your alarms." That was the first time I ever tried that. It worked every morning. I told myself very clearly and carefully as I went to sleep, "I will get up at five to five." I didn't need to look at my clock or ask, "Is it five to five yet?" I could actually trust the mind, and when I woke up and opened my eyes and looked at my clock, it was five minutes to five-- give or take two minutes. It's incredible how the mind works. I don't know how it did it, how it remembered, but it did. It works in exactly the same way if you give clear instructions, if you program your mind: "Now is the time to watch the present moment." "Be in the present moment." "Be in the present moment." That's all you need to do. Then you can let the mind do the work.

It's also important when you're instructing the gatekeeper to know not just what you're supposed to be doing but also what you're not supposed to be doing -- in other words to know the dangers on the path. It's important to know the dangers as well as the goal because this enables the gatekeeper to know who is allowed in and also who is not allowed in. They need to be very clear about both types of "people". It's not enough to just have a list of who's allowed in. If the gatekeeper hasn't got a list of who's not allowed in, then they could easily make mistakes.

The Gatekeeper at Stage One. Now in the first of these stages of meditation, Present Moment Awareness, the goal -- who's allowed in -- is just anything in the present moment. It can be the sound of a bird. It can be the sound of a truck in the distance. It can be the wind going past. It can be someone coughing or banging the door. It doesn't matter. If it is something happening now, then it is part of the present moment awareness. It can be the breath. It can be a Samadhi Nimitta. It can be a Jhana. That's all part of the present moment. So be very clear of what's allowed in, and welcome that.

Again, one should also be very clear of what's not allowed in. What are the dangers to present moment awareness? Those dangers are any thought, any perception, any view of the past or the future. That is, any looking "back" or any looking "forward". It's important to know those dangers, to articulate them very clearly. Sometimes when I make my resolutions I actually include the danger in the resolution. "I'll be aware of the present moment, but I'll not go off into the past or the future." "I'll be aware of the present moment, but I'll disregard the past or the future." "I'll be aware of the present moment, and I'll disregard the past and the future." Saying that to oneself, instructing the gatekeeper about the dangers as well as the goals, helps mindfulness do its task. What happens then is that when the dangers to that stage arise, mindfulness knows, "This is not what I'm supposed to be doing". Mindfulness discards that past or that future thought or perception. This is what happens. As I have been stating, this is the nature of the mind if you program it properly.

The Gatekeeper at Stage Two. In the second stage of Silent Present Moment Awareness, one has the goal of silence in the present, and the danger is inner chatter, inner thought. So one should tell the mind that's what it's got to avoid; that's the enemy; that's the danger. You tell the mind very clearly at the beginning of that stage: "I'll be silently aware in the present moment and will discard all inner chatter." "I'll be silently aware in the present moment. I will discard all inner chatter." "I will be silently aware in the present moment and will discard all inner chatter." That way you establish mindfulness. You give it a chance to work because you've instructed it very clearly.

The Gatekeeper at Stage Three. In the third stage, Silent Present Moment Awareness of the Breath, one instructs the mind three times to be aware of the breath in the present moment. "I'll be aware of the breath in the present moment and will discard all other perceptions and thoughts." What are the dangers? It's everything other than the breath, which includes: the sounds outside, the feelings in the body, people coughing, thoughts about anything else, lunch or dinner, or whatever. Everything else other than the breath is a danger. So one should tell oneself: "I will be aware of the breath in the present moment and discard all other perceptions or thoughts." "I will be aware of the breath in the present moment and discard all other perceptions and thoughts." "I will be aware of the breath in the present moment and discard all other perceptions and thoughts." Again, having told the mind very clearly both what it is supposed to be doing and not doing, you find you can let the mind do its work. One just looks on. When a thought other than the breath comes up, when you're perceiving say the sound of a lawnmower outside, straight away the mind knows it's not supposed to be doing this and it turns away automatically. One is training the mind in mindfulness. It's fascinating to watch the mind when it's well trained. It does what it has been told without having to tell it again. Because it's already been told, it remembers the instructions. It knows what it's doing and the meditation becomes smooth and has the appearance of effortlessness.

The meditation is not effortless though. You're putting in the effort but at the right times, at the times when it's really going to bear fruit. In just the same way as growing a tree. There are times when you put effort in and times when you let things be. You plant the seed in the ground. Then you water it and fertilise it. But most of the time, when you're growing a tree, your job is just to guard it to make sure that nothing interferes with the process. The seed has got the instructions; it just needs to be given the chance. In the same way don't keep interfering with the mind. Don't keep prodding it and pushing it and telling it to do things, because otherwise after a while it will just rebel. "Leave me alone. Look, I'm trying to do my job. Get out of the way," says the mind. And if you don't leave the mind alone quickly, your meditation's shot!

The Gatekeeper at Stage Four. In the fourth stage of the meditation, Full Sustained Attention on the Breath, mindfulness is to be told to be aware of the whole breath in every moment and not to allow other things to intrude on this smooth, continuous awareness of the breath. "I shall be aware of the whole breath, continually and just disregard anything other than the breath in every moment." "I shall be aware of the whole breath continually and disregard everything else." "I shall be aware of the whole breath continually and disregard anything else" If you instruct the mind very carefully and clearly, you're giving mindfulness a chance. You only have to tell yourself the message three times at the beginning and just see what happens.

If you've got a very forgetful type of mindfulness, in other words if you give yourself these instructions and after one or two minutes you find you're just drifting off to "Goodness knows where", there are two possible reasons. One, you didn't instruct yourself carefully or clearly enough as to what you're supposed to be doing; or two, you really have got very weak mindfulness. If you really have weak mindfulness then every three or four minutes you should repeat the instructions. There's no need to repeat the instructions every ten or fifteen seconds. Repeating of the instructions as often as that causes a disturbance in meditation, which never gives meditation a chance to work and which eventually just gives rise to restlessness and despair.

You should give yourself the instructions very carefully, and you'll find you will remember them. So little by little you develop mindfulness. You will notice that this thing we call mindfulness starts off with a huge territory to be aware of: the present moment. There's a huge amount of things you can be conscious of in the present moment. Then it's developed and refined down bit by bit. Instead of anything in the present moment, it becomes that which is silent in the present moment, discarding all that belongs to chatter and thought. Then instead of just silence in the present moment, everything is discarded other than the silent awareness of the breath in the present moment, just awareness of the "in-breath," and the "out-breath". Then everything is discarded other than the full awareness of the breath, from the very beginning of the in-breath to the end of the in-breath, from the very beginning of the out-breath to the end of the out-breath.

Samadhi -- Sustained Awareness on Just One Thing

The difference between Stage Three and Stage Four, awareness of the breath and full awareness of the breath, is that for awareness of the breath you just have to notice part of each in-breath and part of each out-breath. Once you've noticed part of the in-breath then the mind can go wandering off somewhere else, but it has to be "home" again in time to catch the next out-breath. Once it's seen the breath going out, then it can go off again and observe other things, until it has to come home again to catch the breath going in again. Awareness still has places where it can go. It's still got some "width". It is tied to the breath, but on a long leash. You can, at this third stage, be aware of other things as well as the breath. But for full awareness of the breath you need to completely lock the awareness into the breathing and be aware of nothing else. That's why that fourth stage is so important in this meditation. It's where you really grab hold of your meditation object. You have continuous awareness with it. The awareness here is refined onto one small area of existence, just your breath. This is what we're doing with awareness. We're restricting it. Instead of allowing it to go all over the place, we're focusing it in. And it's with the focusing in of awareness, that awareness starts to become strong. It's like using a magnifying glass to start a fire. It's concentrating all the energies onto one thing. This ability to sustain the mindfulness, to sustain the awareness, to sustain the attention, is called Samadhi. A good definition of Samadhi is: "Sustaining your attention on one thing". No need to call it "concentration", because concentration misses so much of what is really important in the meaning of Samadhi.

Samadhi is the ability to sustain attention on one thing, and many people can do that in their lives. Take for example a surgeon performing an operation. I've talked with surgeons, and they tell me that sometimes they spend hours just on one operation. They're on their feet all the time, but they say they never feel tired because they have to sustain their attention on the end of their knife, or scalpel. If they don't, the patient might die. Just one little mistake, one lapse of mindfulness, and their patient can die. They can get sued or lose their jobs for killing their patients. Surgeons performing operations have quite a lot of Samadhi. They sustain their attention on what they're doing. Standing there they don't feel any pains or aches in their legs because all their attention is on the end of their knife. Surgeons can get into states of Samadhi because they have to be right there in every moment. It's difficult at

first, but once they get used to it, it actually becomes very pleasant. There's only one thing in the world that they're concerned with -- just this part of the operation which is happening now. This example tells us an important message about samadhi. The message is this: if it's really important, you can do it.

Looking for the Dangers in the Meditation Object.

I like to teach Samadhi by urging the student not only to emphasise the importance of the meditation object at each stage, but as I've said before to combine this sense of importance with a wariness of the dangers to the meditation object as well. With each of the stages, always know the danger -- the enemy to the goal of that particular stage. Again at Stage One the enemy is the past or the future. At Stage Two it's inner chattering. At Stage Three observing things other than the breath. Whatever the enemy is, see if you can identify that as the danger to that stage of the meditation.

For example, if the enemy is the thinking mind, then the danger is insinuating thought which creeps up on you and then grabs hold of you like a python. Once the python has its coils around you, then you are lost. Remember that simile of the snake given in Chapter Five and be alert to the danger. As I also mentioned in that chapter, if you've lost quite a few points from your driving license in the last few months because of radar traps, you know that radar traps are a big danger to you. It means that when driving you become very mindful of the speed limits. If something is a danger to you, you become very mindful of it. Whatever it is that is taking away your success at meditation, identify it. Identify the main danger for you in each of these stages.

For example suppose you repeat to yourself three times, "I'll be silently aware of the present moment and not get involved in thinking". At the end of that you may want to become more precise and say to yourself, "The 'snake' I've got to be really concerned about is thoughts about food." Whatever your particular "snake" is, keep a lookout for it. Be wary of it. If you instruct yourself at the beginning what your particular "snake" is and you instruct yourself clearly, intently, then you will find that part of your mindfulness throughout your meditation will always be on the lookout for that which is a danger to your success.

Many of the problems in meditation do not originate at the beginning of the meditation period. They creep into your meditation somewhere in the middle. I like to give the following little technique to new meditators. I tell them: "Just breathe in and breathe out three times and watch every breath. Just three breaths that's all." Now most new meditators can do that without any problems whatsoever. They can watch three breaths -- breathing in, breathing out, breathing in, breathing out, breathing in, breathing out -- with full awareness. Then I say: "Now just do that for not three breaths but three hundred breaths. Do it for a whole hour." Of course they can't do it. Why can we do three breaths but can't do three hundred breaths? The reason is we can start out without any problems and with full awareness but we cannot sustain that awareness. These "snakes", these problems, they creep in usually after we've begun meditation. When you begin meditation it can be very clear. Yet when the bell goes you may ask, "Wow, where did that hour go?". You were snoozing, or you were just thinking about so many different things. You can start out watching the breath and you can finish up thinking about your holidays overseas. Somehow, somewhere the "snakes" come in. Or if you'd rather, the "radar trap" has got you. So you need to tell yourself what your main problem is and to "psyche yourself up" to do something about it.

If you've been meditating long enough, you know your problems, the things that you've really got to look out for. Psyche yourself up, by saying, "Look out for this one". For example, if giving orders is your big problem, say, "Watch out for that one". Really watch out for it. Then when you're meditating, you'll find that when an order is about to be given you will spot it coming. You sidestep the "snake" before it gets its coils around you. You slam on the brakes before the "speed camera" flashes. You've avoided it because you've seen it coming. This is where mindfulness starts to really kick in and become very sharp and very powerful. One learns to sidestep the dangers. You've given clear instructions, sidestepped the dangers, and the meditation really starts to become deep. Mindfulness then does become the controlling faculty of your meditation. It's one thing to define what mindfulness is, but here are clear instructions on how to be mindful, how to set it up, how to program yourself so you are fully mindful.

Arousing Energy

Of course another factor needed for mindfulness is energy. In each of these stages you need energy, and the way that energy is aroused is by learning to put everything you have into what you're doing now. Don't keep anything back for the next moment. It's one of the mistakes which people make -- especially with mental energy. They think, "Well if I really push myself hard now, if I put a lot of energy into this moment, I'll have nothing left for the next moment". It doesn't work that way with the mind. You actually arouse energy. You initiate energy. The more energy you put into this moment, the more you have for the next moment, and the more you've got for the moment afterwards.

With mental energy you actually build up the force. With physical energy it is the opposite. You've only got a certain amount, a certain store of physical energy. So if you use some up now, you haven't got as much for later on. With mental energy, there is a limitless store, and if you put a lot of energy into what you are doing right now, you'll find the next moment, the next five minutes, the next hour or whatever, you're really awake and very alert. You're sharp because you've built up that energy. That's why Ajahn Chah, my Teacher, used to say that whatever you're doing put a hundred percent effort into it. If it's listening to a talk, put one hundred percent effort into listening. If you're sitting meditation, put one hundred percent effort into sitting. If you're walking, put one hundred percent effort into walking. If you're eating your lunch, put one hundred percent effort into eating your lunch. If you're resting, put one hundred percent effort into resting. Really sleep as perfectly as you can. Whatever you do, put one hundred percent effort into it. Then you find that you build up energy. You're awake, you're alive. If, however, you think, "Oh, I don't really need to put energy into this sit," then you get dull. You don't enjoy it so much.

Even put energy into eating your food when eating. See how much you can notice of what you are doing. Then you'll enjoy it more! What's the danger to mindfulness when you are eating food? Usually it's thinking about something else. Then you don't even know what you are putting into your mouth. No wonder so many people suffer from indigestion! Whatever it is that you are doing, know what you are supposed to be doing. Put full effort into it. Know the dangers and avoid those dangers.

Turning Up the Lights

As one builds up mindfulness and it gets very sharp, one realizes that one has been living in a world which has been very dim, with not many lights. As one gets more and more mindful, it's like someone turns on the lights in the room, like the sun comes out and the surroundings become illuminated. That's why being mindful becomes a very joyful experience. It's very pleasant to be mindful because you see so much more of what's around you. It's like "spotlighting" reality. Reality really starts to open out to you. You not only see the colours; you see the shapes and the textures. You see everything there. It appears very beautiful and wonderful. That's why when mindfulness really starts to get strong it generates a lot of happiness and bliss.

People who aren't very mindful, who are dull, who cultivate dullness, who sleep a lot, develop depression. They live in a grey world. I went to England some years ago. Every time I go there, it's in November, December, or January, and it's so miserable then because it's just so grey there. The sun is far in the south because it is wintertime. Only about nine or ten in the morning does it start to get light. By three or four in the afternoon it's dusk again. Everything starts to get very dull, and often the clouds are all grey, and you're in this drizzle, and all the buildings look grey. The street is grey. You look up at the sky, it's grey. It's grey from the top to the bottom. You look at the people there. What do they wear? They wear grey suits and overcoats. You look at the expressions on their faces, they're grey too. You know what tea they drink? Earl Grey! Ha! Ha! It's all grey. It's very grey and miserable and depressing. That's what a person with very little mindfulness is like. It's like living in a sort of London in a perpetual winter. It's just grey and miserable in the mind. There's no sort of light. There's no energy there. One doesn't see very much.

Again when one has a lot of mindfulness it's like going out into a garden in the brilliant sunshine. It's energising, it's beautiful. There's a lot of energy and happiness there. If one can develop that mindfulness, that brightness of the mind, and then focus it on a small part of the world, then one sees deeply into the nature of that. The experience of bright and focused awareness is wonderful and amazing! You see much more beauty than you ever imagined.

So this is a useful simile for mindfulness: turning up the lights of the mind. One becomes more deeply aware because one actually starts to sustain mindfulness on one thing instead of letting mindfulness go all over the place. When that happens, mindfulness illuminates that object and builds up its own energy. One really starts to "see" into something very deeply and wonderfully!

Building Up the "Muscles of Insight"

This practice builds up the "muscles of insight". Just take any object. It doesn't matter if it's a little fly walking on your robe or whether it's a leaf on the bushes outside or whatever. Just stand there, or sit there, and watch that one leaf. Let mindfulness illuminate it until awareness gets so strong on that one little leaf that you see so much of what's going on, on that little leaf. It's not just a green leaf, it's a whole world in there! Then you'll understand the power of mindfulness. When you can sustain mindfulness on one thing, you will know how it illuminates and releases a lot of the beauty in that object. It becomes fascinating just how much you can see! How much interest, how much wonder, how much awe there is in just a tiny leaf! That's where you start to play with mindfulness. You start to play with this power of mindfulness that is blissful and can see so deeply into things. But when you're looking at a leaf, if you start wondering about what you're going to have for dinner; then you can't see very clearly into it. Or if you start looking into a leaf and you start getting dull, sinking into sloth and torpor, or if you're wondering -- "Are people looking at me? Do they think I'm somehow strange?" -- then all those distracting thoughts will obviously break the spell and break the sustained attention. However, if you can sustain your attention on one thing, which is what you're learning with this practice of mindfulness and meditation, then it's amazing what you will see in the world. The world will start to open up and become very beautiful and very fascinating and very wonderful. And that's just the world outside!

If one develops the ability to sustain mindfulness, to sustain attention on one thing for long periods of time, then one generates the ability to bore into something with insight and to see deeply into its nature. If you're one of those persons who wants to discover some of the deep truths of existence, if you don't want to just take it on faith from the books or from the teachers, if you want to find out for yourself, then this is how you find out. This is how to get enlightenment experiences. You develop this powerful mindfulness and point it at some interesting and rich sources of wisdom -- especially at the mind. If you can sustain attention on your mind, "bore into it" as it were, then you will find a whole treasure chest of priceless jewels of deep insight.

So to summarise so far, this is the way of mindfulness: what it actually is, how to develop it and, in particular, how to set up mindfulness at every stage of your meditation. Give yourself clear instructions, know what you're supposed to be doing. When you give yourself clear instructions and just sit back and watch the mind do its job, keeping you at your work, it becomes fascinating. That's all you need to do.

Letting Go of the "Doer"

At times I've described this type of quiet meditation as letting go of the "doer" and sometimes that's been quite confusing to some people. What do you mean "letting go of the doer"? This is what I mean. We do a little bit of doing at the right time, and then we let go and allow the doing to happen. Little by little we can let go of the "doer". We can let go of all that chatter, all that ordering (which is ninety percent of the thinking mind), of always giving ourselves instructions, telling ourselves what to do, getting on our backs when we fail. Thinking, thinking, thinking, thinking, thinking! That's one of the biggest problems for meditators, and this is how to overcome it. There's time to think at the very beginning of each stage by giving ourselves clear instructions. Then we can let go because we see the mind doing all the work. We understand, we realise, we don't need to say anything anymore. We can be quiet.

The Different Levels of Mindfulness Revisited

As our meditation develops not only does the area which mindfulness covers get less and less and less, but mindfulness increases and gets sharper and sharper. One of the marvellous things about meditation is that, as we sharpen the mindfulness we find it has different levels. This is the final thing I want to discuss here about mindfulness, the different levels of mindfulness.

We actually find out that mindfulness of daily life is just so dull and useless for wisdom. It has got very little sharpness or depth at all. When we start developing meditation, we get sharper and more agile. By sharper and agile I mean we can sustain attention on very fine areas of existence, and the attention is very bright as well. However, as we develop the meditation deeper and deeper, we find we have to develop mindfulness to become ever more subtle, agile and sharp. As the meditator develops these different levels it happens so often that they lose the focus of awareness. For example if the breath is one's object, one loses the breath, and often people ask why. What has happened here? What has happened is that the breath has become soft and subtle, but the mindfulness is still too coarse. It hasn't been able to keep up with the development of the breath. If that's happened, one should go back to the stage before. This can happen at any time, but especially when one has full-sustained attention on the breath at stage four.

Sometimes the breath disappears and a Nimitta can come up, but you can't sustain that Nimitta. This is because the quality of mindfulness necessary to sustain a Nimitta has to be very refined, and you haven't built up that level of refined mindfulness yet. So you have to go back to the stage before the Nimitta comes up. Go back to full awareness of the beautiful breath, which is a coarser object than the Nimitta, and let the mindfulness develop further on that. But if your mindfulness is fully developed at the fifth stage, when the Nimitta comes up, mindfulness can handle the more refined object. You will find as this mindfulness becomes more and more sharp and agile, it can sustain attention even on the most subtle objects. But first you have to learn how to sustain attention on the coarser objects. At each of these successive stages the mindfulness has a higher quality to it, far more agile and sharp than at the previous stage. To return to the simile of the mindfulness of the surgeon, the mindfulness required to hold a Nimitta is like the skill required of a surgeon operating on the brain, while the mindfulness required to hold the breath is like the skill required for peeling potatoes. You need quite a different refinement at the subtle level. If you move straight from peeling potatoes onto being a brain surgeon, you're going to make a lot of mess. The same as if you move too quickly from the breath onto the Samadhi Nimitta. You're going to lose it. You're not going to be able to keep it there.

With development, you can experience immovable mindfulness. The mindfulness that is on one thing entirely -- very clear, very sharp. It doesn't move at all. The Buddha said this reaches its peak in the fourth Jhana. That's the peak of mindfulness, where one has complete equanimity. You're just fully aware of one thing, fully aware, unmoving. That's as powerful as mindfulness can get. Once you know that type of mindfulness, then you know how ridiculous it is to think you can become Enlightened without Jhanas. Without such powerful mindfulness you can't get the powerful insights. So you begin to realise for yourself what mindfulness can be, and the sort of mindfulness you need to become Enlightened. The powerful states of mindfulness, not the coarse ones, are the ones that will dig deeply into the nature of things.

So you can see that there are many different levels of mindfulness, and mindfulness isn't just one little thing which is there in daily life and which is the same in deep meditation. Know that mindfulness has many different degrees of power, subtlety and penetration. There are many types of knives -- blunt ones and sharp ones, some for peeling potatoes and some for operating on brains. That's just like mindfulness.

This has been an exposition of what mindfulness means in Buddhism, in Buddhist meditation. Know how to develop it and how to make it very sharp and very agile and how eventually to generate that mindfulness which you can use to dig deep into the nature of your mind and uncover the beautiful treasures of "impermanence", "unsatisfactoriness" and "non-self" (Anicca, Dukkha, Anatta). It's amazing. You can say words like "the great treasures" of Buddhism and people think: "They can't be treasures. How can 'suffering' be a treasure? How can 'impermanence' be a treasure? How can 'non-self' be a treasure? We want something really marvellous and uplifting like 'beauty', 'transcendence', 'cosmic consciousness', or 'The essence of all being'." This is why people don't find the treasures, they don't know what they're looking for./.

-ooOoo-

Source: ("Dhamma Journal", Buddhist Society of Western Australia, July 2001)
<http://www.saigon.com/~anson/ebud/ebmed070.htm>